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U.S. SENATE MAJORITY LEADER • TENNESSEE

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Commerce Committee Hearing
Tsunami Disaster Relief Efforts
Statement By U.S. Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, M.D.

Mr. Chairman, Senator Inouye, and members of the committee I appreciate the opportunity to testify before you today. I want to thank you personally for taking the lead in our nation's efforts to ensure that no tsunami ever again does damage on the scale of the one we witnessed last December 26th.

On January 7, I spent some time flying over the Sri Lankan coast in a helicopter. Through the windows, I witnessed a scene of unending devastation.

I've visited destroyed towns in Sudan and Afghanistan and seen deep, grinding poverty in Uganda and Kenya. The challenges the world's aid-giving nations face in South Asia will prove just as difficult to overcome as those I witnessed in these troubled places.

Over 150,000 people died in the tsunami. At least one million lost their homes. Thousands are missing. Thousands of children will grow up without parents. It will take much time and money to rebuild the infrastructure and revive the economies that existed before the tsunami. Some people may never recover from the psychological shocks they endured.

Human needs exist everywhere the tsunami struck. Nearly all of them relate to health. Despite a massive influx of aid, many people in tsunami-ravaged areas still lack medicines, medical supplies, food, shelter, and clothing.

The absence of clean water, however, has emerged as the most pressing problem. In many areas, the tsunami poisoned wells with salt water and swept away water treatment plants.

In the wake of the tsunami, the world community focused on water issues and, as a result, we appear to have averted a major epidemic. Shortages of potable water made it much more likely that South Asia would face outbreaks of diseases like cholera, typhoid, and dysentery. The large pools of stagnant water I saw along the coast during my travels, likewise, could have become breeding grounds for mosquitoes carrying malaria and dengue fever.

The lack of clean water makes it difficult to cook, bathe, or drink. Without pure water, we can't perform many medical procedures.

In confronting these challenges in South Asia, the United States has shown great compassion. We have committed $350 million in assistance and will commit more in the coming weeks. We've also dispatched 24 ships and 15,000 service men and women to participate in Operation: Unified Assistance. Innovative new technologies from American companies, likewise, have provided clean, safe water to many who would otherwise go without.

And the American people have given hundreds of millions of dollars in private funds.

I support these efforts to help. I participated in them. I commend them. But they deal only with the immediate aftermath of the tsunami. We need to focus on long-term solutions.

Some long-term solutions, like the early warning initiative the administration has proposed and you are championing, Mr. Chairman, will harness the latest technology to provide better warnings. Such systems will save lives. We should support these proposals. We should implement them quickly.

Another set of important long-term solutions, the ones I will focus on today, deal with human health particularly as it relates to water. Here in the United States we rarely even think about the safety of the water we drink. Those who live in developing nations do not have this luxury. The disastrous conditions we have witnessed in the tsunami's aftermath are unfortunately common throughout the developing world. Every day in every place that people go without clean water, a terrible disaster unfolds in slow motion.

That's why I'm moving forward with three closely interrelated proposals to improve health and provide clean water around the world:

First, clean water ought to become a major priority in our development programs. Clean water is fundamental to life. The U.S. government will spend nearly $20 billion this year for international development and humanitarian assistance programs. Excluding tsunami spending, however, we will spend less than $600 million on international water issues. This is less than 3 percent.

A generation ago, this body passed the Clean Water Act to ensure that Americans would forever have safe water for drinking, fishing, and recreation. Now, we face an obligation to work with the world and clean its water. We must work to improve water quality not only in the areas that the tsunami damaged but everywhere that people live without clean water. At least 1.2 billion people live without clean water; 2.4 billion lack access to basic sanitation. This is a crisis. That's why I plan to introduce legislation that will make clean water one of our major foreign aid objectives.

Second, we must recognize that medical assistance can serve as a currency of peace and a vital tool of public diplomacy. Our assistance to other nations carries the most weight when it involves personal, intimate contact on the community level and provides tangible benefits to everyday people. Medical and public health assistance does both of these things. It can bridge gaps of culture, language, and custom that formal diplomacy might not.

One doctor I met in Sri Lanka had an experience that illustrates medicines' power to draw people together. The doctor had e-mailed a call for help just as the wave swamped his hospital. Two days later, a team of Scandinavian physicians who had seen the e-mail arrived to set up a pediatric ward. We need to follow those doctors' example.

I will, therefore, propose a new Peace Corps—the Global Health Corps. This new Global Health Corps would draw together medical professionals and other volunteers from around the nation. Some would volunteer to provide quick assistance when disaster strikes. Others would provide ongoing care in the neediest parts of the developing world. Many Global Health Corps volunteers would come from the ranks of experienced professional doctors, nurses, and medical technicians.

Others would enter the program with little besides an interest in public health and knowledge acquired in a basic training course. Clean water is a critical element to good health and much of the Global Health Corps' work would revolve around this vital, life giving liquid.

But the Corps' would have a much broader mission; it would also serve as a vital component of our public diplomacy efforts. Corps members would serve as shinning examples of the American peoples' charity and good will. Its members would serve for the good of humanity and, in so doing, these doctors, nurses, technicians, and scientists would become ambassadors of peace.

Third, we should leverage private dollars to develop water infrastructure around the world much as we have done through the State Department's Revolving Loan Fund. We know that governments cannot make all decisions. Private companies, not state entities, will ultimately do the hard work of providing clean water to everyone on Earth. In the tsunami-ravaged areas, we have seen private businesses big and small assist with everything from water purification to logistics.

To leverage more private dollars, we should look for ways we can encourage private companies to help with water projects. In particular, we should investigate ways we can mitigate financial risks, underwrite loans, and encourage new technology developments related to clean water.

Cleaning the planet's water will take time. And it will take commitment. The goals are bold. We could redirect current development assistance funds towards this goal. But we may also need to spend more. These three steps will begin our efforts. I ask my colleagues to support these proposals. Together, we can not only save millions of people, but give millions more the opportunity to live healthier, more fulfilling lives.

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